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Ladies—manly airs assuming!

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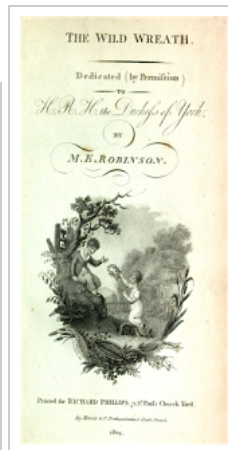
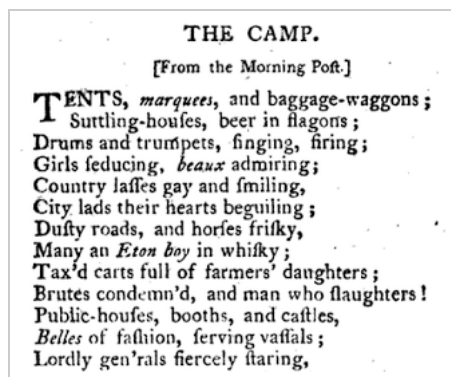
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Pride and Prejudice: The Student Blog

Wednesday, April 10, 2013

Ladies—manly airs assuming!

Mary Robinson's "*Winkfield Plain; Or a Description of a Camp in the Year 1800*" (1804) elucidates and confirms the debauchery, profligacy, and licentiousness associated with army encampments that Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* portrays through the militia. Mary Robinson became famous in London long before she published any of her writing because of her relationship with the Prince Regent ("*Mary Darby Robinson*"). Although their affair was short, Robinson never escaped the damage it afflicted to her reputation, neither did she receive any of the monetary promises that prince had made to her. Using the nom de plume "Oberon," Robinson originally published this poem as "The Camp" in the *Morning Post* and it was reprinted in *The Spirit of the Public Journals* in 1802. Robinson later included it in her 1804 collection of poetry *The Wild Wreath*. As the title suggests the poem depicts an army encampment in a series of epigrammatic images. The camp is "All confusion, din and riot,/ Nothing clean—and nothing quiet" (235). The "beer in flagons" and "Many an Eton Boy in whisky" undoubtedly contribute to this noise (234). The camp is a hotbed of licentious behavior with "Girls seducing, beaux admiring" (234). Interestingly, it is the girls in Robinson's poem who are seducing at the camp, the beaux are admiring, not actively pursuing. Later, Robinson describes "petit maitres" or dandies "in the glad themselves caressing" while "Ladies—manly airs assuming!" (234). The traditional gender roles here are inverted: the men are preoccupied with dress while the ladies assume manly airs.



In *Pride and Prejudice*, the army is exhibited by the militia and its primary representation: Wickham. Robinson's inversion of gender roles recalls the scene where Lydia tells Elizabeth and Jane of the fun she had at Mrs. Forsters. She recounts that she, Kitty, and Mrs. Forster dressed up Chamberlayne in women's clothes as a joke and that Denny, Wickham, and Pratt, having come later, did not discover the truth until Lydia could no longer contain her laughter. In this scene, as in the poem, the women wield the power traditionally attributed to men. While Col. Forster knew of the trick, the women devised, executed, and unveiled it. Lydia and Wickham's relationship can be read in light of this power inversion. Although Wickham is characterized throughout the novel as the pursuer of Lydia, it is entirely possible and even probable that Lydia was the one who pursued the relationship. Her idea of Brighton was a place where she would be surrounded by officers with whom she is flirting. Even in her reverie, she is the active agent: it is she who is flirting with the men, not the other way around. Wickham's choice of Lydia because of her lack of fortune, which begs the question: why do they elope? In the letter Lydia leaves for Mrs. Forster, she writes of what a good joke it will be when she writes to her family as "Lydia Wickham." Her seduction of Wickham will be just another joke that she executes. This feminization of the army officers, however, appears to be relegated only to the camp because in London—away from the Brighton camp—it is clear that Wickham will not marry Lydia without Darcy's compensation.

Posted by Heather Weis at 9:31 PM

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About

A blog site featuring original research by undergraduate students at Wright State University enrolled in Crystal B. Lal's *Pride and Prejudice* (Spring 2013).

We hope you enjoy reading about the novel and historical contexts surrounding famous novel. And be sure to participate in CELIA's Bicentennial events on October 2013. Click [here](#) for more information.

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